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Performance, Learning and Development

Richard Boyatzis and David Kolb identify Performance, Learning and Development as the three modes of growth and adaptation throughout our lives and careers. As we have read, viewed and studied examples of these three modes how differing individuals relate to them is often without thought or design. Boyatzis and Kolb describe Performance mode as the “quest for mastery”. But, what is a mode? The most common definition is that a mode is a manner of acting or doing. So, what exactly does that mean in the context of Erin Brockovich, Glen Holland, Linda Greenlaw, Dr. Danielle Ofri, Steve Jobs, Lowell Bergman, Ryan Bingham or Parker Palmer? Can you only be in just one mode at a time and how do they each fit within these modes?

Boyatzis and Kolb identify the Performance mode as a “person’s growth and adaptation through a focus on effective job performance.” (pg 81) Clearly Erin Brockovich’s growth as an individual and adaptation to performance was not an overt design to career development, but rather a performance without design. Brockovich’s ultimate success in her career was born out of desperation to feed her family. Eventually, her performance was generated by her single minded drive to help the families medically devastated by Pacific Gas & Electric’s overt pollution of area ground water. That she was able to be effective in her job performance was manifested by what Boyatzis and Kolb refer to as “routine acts performed with the intent of coping or in the pursuit of survival.” (pg 81) It could be argued that the acts of Brockovich were far from routine however, her deeply felt sympathy for the families she met and her focus on bringing PG&E to account for their actions developed a routine of confrontation and investigation and a learning of new skills that elevated Brockovich’s effective job performance and her own ultimate personal growth as a career woman. A career in law was not an initial focus, but through her job performance she was able to adapt to a successful career in her quest for mastery of the law.

Glen Holland in the film *Mr. Holland’s Opus* is also an example of growth and adaptation on effective job performance without design. As a classical songwriter struggling with career obstacles, his focus on teaching music was simply a means of providing secondary funding to his ultimate goal of musical success. In Boyatzis and Kolb’s two examples of people

involved in Performance mode they write, “This is not to say that occasionally either one of them will not engage in actions for another purpose, but such ‘divergences’ are viewed as distractions from their direction.” (pg 83) Holland initially viewed teaching music as a distraction from his main direction of writing classical music. But, in so doing his effectiveness as a teacher of music began to overlay his focus on song writing. What this implies is that effective Performance mode and personal growth do not always lie within the design path we initially set. In opposition of Boyatzis and Kolb’s examples, Brockovich and Holland actually found their growth and development through divergence of their original focus and intent.

On the other hand, Boyatzis and Kolb’s theory of Performance mode is transparent in the growth and adaptation of Linda Greenlaw’s career in fishing. In *The Hungry Ocean*, Greenlaw certainly exhibited a “quest for mastery” as a fishing boat captain. This quest was essentially intentional and necessary as it was grounded in the simple task of survival of the perils inherent in deep ocean fishing and she understood the requirements of success when she wrote, “To be considered a successful Grand Banks fisherman, a captain must manage three things: the boat, the crew, and the fish.” (Preface, pg xi) As Greenlaw describes the necessity toward safety of equipment maintenance on a fishing boat, developing a trust and work ethic of and from a crew, and developing a sense of location and respect for the fish, she embodies the quest to master all three with a cognizant path to personal growth and career development and without divergence or distraction from her goal; a goal to return to port with the crew’s health, safety intact and a hold full of fish, guaranteeing they will return once again to the sea.

If any case study were to mirror Boyatzis and Kolb’s theory of performance it would be that of Steve Jobs. Every nuance of Jobs character was a performance as though he were on a stage for exemplary career development. Job’s goal was to become a powerful force in the business world; to stand out from the crowd of players. This he accomplished in his unorthodox and unconventional approach to his quest for mastery in business by bringing the personal computer into every home in the world, but his personal restlessness manifested into other arenas of technology and as Boyatzis and Kolb propose, “The person in this mode is preoccupied with success and his or her intent is mastery of a job or arena of his or her life.” (pg 81) This statement of Performance mode could well have had Jobs in mind, not only with his pursuit of business success, but also in mastery and control of his personal life. However, based on

Boyatzis and Kolb's posit on sub-modes, we could also view Jobs as on the edge of performance and learning theory.

The Learning mode identifies "the key abilities, or competencies, are learning skills, self-image, and contingent values." (pg 84) We can certainly view Jobs in this context as his learning skills were many in that he had the ability to change his learning, through what Boyatzis and Kolb identify as "cross-functional", from one area of technology to another, from computers to animation, as well as a highly developed ability to think outside the box and try new endeavors, such as NeXt. That NeXt proved to be a relative failure does not diminish this competency. Also of note within the Learning mode is much of Job's success was built on his ideal of self-image. In other words, how he represented himself and how he was perceived by the business world was important in the decisions he made both professionally and personally. Arguably it was this self-image that propelled him to pursue reinstatement as CEO of Apple Computer.

Dr. Danielle Ofri also appears to be seeking career development by moving in and out of both Performance and Learning mode. Throughout her book, *Incidental Findings: Lessons from My Patients in the Art of Medicine*, she is on a "quest of mastery" in medicine through her travels to various clinics perfecting her knowledge of medicine. But, at the same time she is on a continuous quest of learning as exemplified by the title of her book and her continuous questioning on her ability to heal as she writes, "The sheer enormity and variety of the ways in which illness and medicine inflicted misery on patients was astounding." (pg 100) Consequently, through highly developed Performance mode she is also in constant Learning mode in order to alleviate the variety of illness and misery of her patients.

In the film *The Insider*, Lowell Bergman could also be seen as moving between Performance and Learning mode. Without question he was a superb producer of the television show "60 minutes"; getting the subject of a story to agree to an interview even at the risk of his life as we saw in the beginning of the film, blindfolded and left to speculate on his fate in the Middle East. Bergman was clearly geared for "quest of mastery" in television production and superior quality. At the same time, however, he was learning of the difficulties inherent in working with temperamental correspondents, maintaining a positive self-image and certainly being true to his moral values. When faced with betrayal by his colleagues and his own

perceived betrayal of Jeffrey Wigand, Bergman's morality left no course but to leave "60 minutes" and change career.

How about Ryan Bingham in the film "Up in the Air"? Where does he fit? Bingham also moves between Performance and Learning modes. Bingham's "quest for mastery" in his profession, mass firing of people he didn't know, was exemplary. Bingham clearly was in Performance mode throughout most of the film. At the same time, he was also deeply entrenched in the Learning mode. We viewed this often as well throughout the film with special emphasis on his interactions with his colleague, Natalie Keener. Without the influence of Keener, Bingham would most likely have remained in Performance mode through his entire career. However, Keener's own Learning mode forced Bingham to question his role in the company; question his future, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes in Finding Flow in Psychology Today. "Work is much more like a game than most other things we do during the day. It usually has clear goals and rules of performance." Bingham was learning through Keener that those clear goals and rules of performance were becoming cloudy and that everything he believed about his self-image and contingent values was called into question.

The differences between Performance mode and Learning mode appears to be a gray area with most of the above examples moving deftly between the two, specifically if we assume that the "quest for mastery" in a career involves the key abilities of Learning mode of learning skills, self-image and contingent values as defined by Boyatzis and Kolb. This would imply that in every career these two modes of career development are cyclical just as Boyatzis and Kolb write, "Growth occurs throughout our jobs and careers in many forms." (pg 76) Subsequently, in order to better our career development it may be necessary to move in and out of Performance and Learning mode in order to find the best development path for each individual.

As we move throughout life from child to young adult and ultimately develop into adults, so our careers also move through stages. Boyatzis and Kolb identify the Development mode as "a person in this mode is preoccupied with perpetual human and social dilemmas, typically in the form of a 'calling'. The person's intent is focused on fulfillment of his or her pursuit, or calling, in terms of a specific agenda." (pg 85) This particular description of the Development mode appears rather ambiguous and not as defined as Performance and Learning. Nearly every career could be defined as focusing on fulfillment or pursuit of a specific agenda. However, the authors

later clarify that “the prerequisite to entry into this mode is typically an event in life that provides the search for purpose or calling.” (pg 87) Each of the examples we have studied have experienced that life event at some point in their careers.

Parker Palmer is difficult to classify in Performance and Learning mode, but in Development mode he shines. Palmer’s adult life appears to be of a man in the throes of depression, the catalytic event in his life, and as a man in a search for purpose he writes in *Let Your Life Speak*, “But I do not understand why others are able to find new life in the midst of a living death, though I am one of them.” (pg 58) Palmer moves through Development mode on a quest for meaning in life and career and in so doing finds himself and his calling; to help each other deal with our inner issues and believes we are all in trouble, “Since we can’t get out of it, we must get into it—by helping each other explore our inner lives.” (pg. 91) Palmer has a deft way of applying his personal despair and triumph into thought provoking metaphor on the seasons of our lives and by extension our career development. In Development mode, Palmer mirrors our inner voices and our inner choices and by doing so he has found his calling.

Although Dr. Danielle Ofri spends much of her career in Performance and Learning mode, we could also classify her on occasion in Development mode, searching for her place in medicine and education. The one event that stands out as a catalyst would be her surreptitious attempt to help a young woman obtain a safe abortion. This event prompted Ofri to question her role in medicine and her purpose in performing medicine; does she honor her obligation to her employer, a catholic clinic at the time, or is her sole obligation to the health and welfare of her patient? As we have read, Ofri’s decision developed her understanding that the patient always comes first and reinforced her calling to perform the very best medicine possible.

Glen Holland in *Mr. Holland’s Opus* does not move into Development mode until late in life. Throughout his career as a music teacher he considered himself a composer first and a teacher second and every life event, from marriage to fatherhood, takes him further from what he believes is his dream of composing. Holland had difficulty finding his calling as he states, “How am I supposed to be everything for everybody?” Arguably the catalytic event in Holland’s life was his forced retirement. Throughout his career Holland believed his true calling was in music composition; denying that his true purpose lay in the music he taught and the human lives he changed, reflected in Boyatzis and Kolb when they write, “Too often, denial, repression, and

avoidance replace the reflection and introspection needed for this discovery.” (pg 87) But, whether you discover your true calling early or late in your career, sometimes you find you were on the right path all along. As Mr. Holland’s opus was his life’s work as a teacher, just like Mr. Holland, we can find that everyone’s opus is not just the culmination of a successful career, but the legacy left by that career.

Richard Boyatzis and David Kolb have presented an intriguing hypothesis on the varying modes that career professionals pass through during their working, and sometimes personal, lives. Although they also postulate that each individual has a “dominant” mode, whether they are continuously in one mode, or moving back and forth between modes, they write, “The basic question that allows insight into the mode is not the choice of activity but what people are doing with the experience.” (pg 89) This can be exemplified with some of the examples in our study, such as Parker Palmer’s dominant mode appears to be Development mode, whereas Steve Jobs dominant mode is Performance and Ryan Bingham as Learning. Dr. Ofri’s dominant mode is more difficult to classify, but if necessary her dominant mode leans more toward Development mode. Regardless, what is intriguing with this mode theory is how it plays out in the realm of the workplace. If each individual has a dominant mode and a continuous flow in and out of each mode, how would it interact with other individuals in the workplace? Would it create chaos of thought and action, or are the different modes subtle enough that they are undetectable? That would make for a very interesting study, but maybe for another day.